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To Heaven with the Devil: The Importance of Satan's Salvation for God's Goodness in the Works of Gregory of Nyssa

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Abstract

Scholars generally agree on two points regarding Gregory of Nyssa's eschatology: That he believed in universal reconciliation, and that he believed the salvation of all rational beings eventually will include Satan himself. Such beliefs, far from making Gregory a notorious figure, have largely gone unnoticed outside of academia. Further, even among those for whom Gregory's universalism is a given, his contention that even Satan will be saved often is treated as an afterthought.

Yet Gregory seemed to think the salvation of Satan was quite important. He discussed this eventuality most clearly in his treatises *On the Soul and Resurrection* and the *Catechetical Oration*, and in the latter ties it to his core teaching on the incarnation and atonement. A close reading of the two works reveals how Gregory saw God's goodness – a prominent theological theme throughout his career – as requiring such a broad eschatological vision. Scholars appear to have overlooked the centrality of Satan's salvation to Gregory's overarching theology; nevertheless, Gregory believed God could not be good, and therefore not be God, if he did not ultimately save his greatest enemy, the devil himself.

Over the course of *On the Soul and Resurrection* and the *Catechetical Oration*, Gregory connects God's goodness to the salvation of Satan in two distinct ways – first, through the inherent goodness of God's created order, and second, through the creativity of the atonement. The restoration of Satan, therefore, was of primary importance to the Nyssen's theology, as this paper will show.

Satan as Part of the Goodness of the Created Order

The two works in which Gregory of Nyssa lays out his eschatological beliefs most directly are *On the Soul and Resurrection* and the *Catechetical Oration*.¹ The former is styled as a discussion between Gregory and his famous sister Macrina, who is dying. Gregory comes to her bedside to mourn her imminent death, which occasions the discussion described by the title. Gregory uses Macrina as the mouthpiece for his own views, while his character poses objections and questions for “Macrina” to answer. The *Catechetical Oration*, on the other hand, is a straightforward, comprehensive treatment of Gregory’s theology, a primer on such core concepts as the incarnation, atonement, sacraments and eschatology.

As a result, the *Catechetical Oration* is also where Gregory states explicitly the view of God that drives the rest of his assumptions. In the introduction, Gregory is clear in his emphasis on the paramount goodness of God, couched in a hypothetical discussion with a Greek atheist: “Now, whether it be with respect to power, or the idea of goodness, or wisdom or incorruption or eternity or any other relevant attribute of God, he will agree, as a reasonable inference, that we must think of the divine nature as perfect in every case.”² For Gregory, God’s perfection is proof of his singularity, and God’s goodness forms a core part of the argument: To the extent God is good, he must be

¹ Mario Baghos, “Reconsidering *Apokatastasis* in St. Gregory of Nyssa’s *On the Soul and Resurrection* and the *Catechetical Oration*,” *Phronema* 27, no. 2 (2012): 126, describes the former as “the most comprehensive account of the saint’s doctrine of universal salvation” and the latter as “a comprehensive outline,” an “existential metanarrative” and a “holistic lens” with which to view the subject.

² Gregory of Nyssa, “Address on Religious Instruction,” *Christology of the Later Fathers*, Library of Christian Classics 3, ed. Edward R. Hardy (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 269. Although I adhere to the scholarly consensus by calling it the *Catechetical Oration* in the text, I’ll defer to the name used by the source cited in these footnotes.

perfectly good. Later, Gregory lists goodness with righteousness, wisdom and power as “equally ascribed” to God.³

Gregory’s notion of God’s goodness borrows heavily from Platonic and Neoplatonic authors, supplemented by scripture.⁴ He travels that road most thoroughly in *On the Soul and Resurrection*, where he connects the goodness of God with the goodness of God’s creation. The soul, as a product of God, must share in the characteristics of God, “Macrina” argues in her conversation with Gregory. Likewise, because the divine nature is “the fulfillment of the [lesser] goods,” all good things find their existence within it – and because God considered the entirety of his creation good, all created things must be good, as well. “Outside of the divine nature,” Gregory writes, “nothing exists except evil, which – although this is paradoxical – has its existence in not existing.”⁵ In short, it’s all good and, as such, all from God. “If our life is determined by God,” Gregory writes in Macrina’s voice, “it is agreed it cannot begin with evil.”⁶ Goodness and Godness cannot be separated, and this perfect goodness passed to all of creation, including humanity and the angels, but also to the demons and the devil.

That becomes important when Gregory begins discussing those creatures found “under the earth.” Explicating Phil. 2:10-11,⁷ “Macrina” reads the text as describing three classes of rational beings: angels “in heaven,” humans “on earth” and demons “under the

³ Ibid., 270.

⁴ Ilaria Ramelli, “Good/Beauty,” *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Lucas Francisco Matea-Seco and Giulio Maspero, trans. Seth Cherney (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 356 ff., provides an excellent summary of Gregory’s thought on God’s goodness, much of which is reflected in the two works discussed in this paper, though Ramelli focuses mainly on other treatises.

⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and Resurrection*, Fathers of the Church 58, trans. Virginia Woods Callahan (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1968), 238-39.

⁶ Ibid., 251.

⁷ “So that at the name of Jesus everyone in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Common English Bible)

earth.” Regarding the latter, Gregory writes of Paul, “He means that when evil is blotted out by the long period of the ages, nothing will be left except the good beings, and that among them, there will be agreement in the lordship of Christ.”⁸ Of course, Gregory has already argued that all created beings contain an element of good; indeed, he does not consider evil to be a natural state of existence because that would require God to create it – an impossibility because God would then be less than perfectly good. The “good beings,” therefore, must include demons restored to their original goodness because if demons were to cease existing, the goodness God instilled in them would be proven weaker than the evil to which they turned.

Gregory shared his assumptions about the creation and nature of the fallen angels with his brother Basil of Caesarea and their Cappadocian colleague, Gregory Nazianzus. The trio agreed that, as Morwenna Ludlow summarizes, “even though a rational being might reject its creator with its will, it remains related to God ontologically because in Cappadocian theology, God remains eternally lord of the entire created world.”⁹ Nyssa himself writes that demons “have rejected the better portion of their own will and have defected from the good.”¹⁰ Such an assumption leads to a view of the demonic filled with tension: Demons are at once “utterly opposed to God and thus evil,” yet inextricably a “part of God’s good creation.”¹¹

Gregory resolves the tension by focusing on the basic equality of all creatures beneath the transcendent God. Nyssa not only argues in the *Catechetical Oration* that

⁸ *Soul and Resurrection*, 227.

⁹ Morwenna Ludlow, “Demons, Evil and Liminality in Cappadocean Theology,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 193.

¹⁰ *Soul and Resurrection*, 227.

¹¹ Ludlow, “Demons, Evil and Liminality,” 189.

“every created thing is equally inferior to the Most High,” but he explicitly rejects the notion that heavenly bodies are closer to God’s dignity than earthly ones. It follows from that argument that the demons and Satan, themselves created as heavenly beings, are likewise not even further beneath God’s dignity. And if these creatures above, on and beneath the earth are equal in the eyes of God, Gregory argues, then only one thing remained to do, if God were truly good: “to come to the aid of those in need.”¹² In *On the Soul and Resurrection*, Gregory is even more explicit: In Phil. 2:10-11, Paul “speaks of the angelic and celestial beings and ... refers ... to us, and he says that one harmonious feast will prevail for all.”¹³

In this way, Gregory defects from his fellow theologians. Just as humans have chosen to twist God-given emotions such as anger and fear into sinful impulses,¹⁴ he argues, so too did rational angels, beginning with Satan himself, choose to turn from the goodness within themselves and embrace evil. “All things equally participate in the good,” Gregory writes in the *Catechetical Oration* before describing how Satan grew envious of humanity. Although Satan was “created for no evil end by Him who framed the universe in goodness,” the angelic power “by its unwillingness to acknowledge the good contrived its opposite.” The devil was now “divorced from his natural affinity with the good” and “spontaneously impelled and carried to the final limit of iniquity.”¹⁵

Such a limit, Gregory argues, is nonexistence.¹⁶ Yet that would be incompatible with his belief that all created beings contain an original seed of goodness as the result of

¹² *Religious Instruction* 27, 305-06.

¹³ *Soul and Resurrection*, 259.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 222.

¹⁵ *Religious Instruction* 6, 278-80.

¹⁶ *Religious Instruction*, 21, 298.

their creation at the hands of the immutably good God.¹⁷ Their return to goodness, therefore, must be inevitable, as Ilario Ramelli points out: “Sin and evil will be extinguished, because the sinners are creatures of God, but evil is not. In the end, all will be found in the Good-God, in an infinite loving tension toward the supreme Object of love.”¹⁸

Indeed, according to Gregory, God’s perfect goodness must overwhelm evil in the end. The Nyssen uses the “all in all” logic of 1 Cor. 15:28¹⁹ to argue that because evil exists only in choice, it will disappear as all choices become subsumed into the all-good God. Such a process will take time, Gregory writes, and he compares the process of stripping evil from the weighted soul to retrieving mangled survivors from earthquake rubble and scraping dried mud from a rope threaded through a hole; yet he is clear that “it is altogether necessary for evil to be removed from that which exists and ... that which does not exist in being does not exist at all.”²⁰ Given Gregory’s assumptions about the nature of all created beings, including angels, demons and the devil, these existing beings too must be purged of evil as God restores them to their original state of goodness – or else God himself cannot be good, and therefore cannot be God.

Although Basil and the two Gregorys agree on the origin, present nature and eventual eschatological submission of demonic power, only Nyssa leaves room for

¹⁷ *Soul and Resurrection*, 267: “God proposes for everyone a participation in the goods in Himself which Scripture says: ‘eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the mind of man.’ In my opinion, this is nothing else than existing in God Himself, since the good which is beyond hearing and seeing and the heart would be the very thing which is superior to the universe.”

¹⁸ Ramelli, “Good/Beauty,” 358.

¹⁹ “But when all things have been brought under his control, then the Son himself will also be under the control of the one who gave him control over everything so that God may be all in all.” (CEB)

²⁰ *Soul and Resurrection*, 241-42.

demonic restoration by citing Phil. 2:10-11 and 1 Cor. 15:28²¹ – because only Gregory prioritizes so heavily and consistently the goodness of God and takes such goodness to its natural, radical extreme.

Satan as the Patient Healed with a Fishhook

The second, more explicit way in which Gregory presumes the eschatological salvation of Satan is in his discussion of the incarnation and atonement in the *Catechetical Oration*. Gregory's "fishhook" analogy is well known, though not particularly well liked,²² for its colorful imagery of God using Jesus' humanity as the bait with which to ensnare the devil, who held humanity captive in the prison of death. Satan, enamored with the uniqueness of the miraculous person before him, gladly traded all of humanity for this extraordinary human, only to find that within the bait lay the hook of divinity. When confronted with the light of the divine, death and darkness died, robbing the devil of his power and setting in motion the process of restoration that will end with God as "all in all."²³

²¹ While this verse is cited directly in *Soul and Resurrection*, 243, the discussion refers back to the initial question of the nature of creation, *Soul and Resurrection*, 203.

²² Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa, Ancient and (Post)modern* (Oxford: Oxford, 2007), 109-10, and Nicholas P. Constan, "The Last Temptation of Satan: Divine Deception in Greek Patristic Interpretations of the Passion Narrative," *Harvard Theological Review* 97, no. 2 (2004): 145-46, contain excellent summaries of the historically arched eyebrows with which scholars have discussed Gregory's imagery.

²³ *Religious Instruction* 23, 301: "In that way, as it is with a greedy fish, he might swallow the Godhead like a fishhook along with the flesh, which was the bait. Thus, when life came to dwell with death and light shone upon darkness, their contraries might vanish away. For it is not in the nature of darkness to endure the presence of light, nor can death exist where life is active.

Gregory's theory of atonement is imaginative indeed. Its merits are beyond this paper's purview;²⁴ rather, our interest is with how Gregory roots the atonement within the nature of God's goodness – and how he argues that God's apparent deceit is evidence of such goodness because the trickery serves ultimately to restore Satan. Gregory thus lays out an argument scholars seemingly have ignored: Far from being an afterthought, the restoration of the devil is absolutely necessary if God is to be the perfectly good being Gregory insists he is.

God's goodness is a major thread in the *Catechetical Oration*. As noted above, Gregory early in the work considers goodness to be a foundational attribute of God that cannot help but carry over into his creation. Indeed, the pre-Adamic creation is so good it virtually requires that God create humanity, for "it was not right that light should remain unseen, or glory unwitnessed, or goodness unenjoyed."²⁵ Gregory then reiterates his belief, already expressed in *On the Soul and Resurrection*, that goodness is such an inextricable part of God and his creation that evil can only exist as a nonentity, followed by the description, discussed above, of Satan's decision to close his eyes to the good within himself and allow evil to blossom within.

This notion of goodness as an inherent part of God's creation becomes the center of Gregory's argument against the belief, held by "little minds," that God would not deign to enter the world in human form. Gregory condemns the assumption that "the birth, the upbringing, the growth, the natural advance to maturity, the experience of death and the return from it" are evil when they all originate from the immutably good God:

²⁴ Conostas, "Last Temptation," makes a compelling case that Gregory is utilizing an anti-Arian apologetic – equating the heresy's low Christology with the devil's blunder – with imagery that would have been well-known in his fourth-century context.

²⁵ *Religious Instruction* 5, 276.

“Since we have shown that what is good must be altogether free from all shame and evil, must we not pity the stupidity of those who claim that the good is unbefitting to God?”²⁶

The incarnation therefore was the act of the ultimate Good entering his good-yet-astray creation to rescue humanity, which needed a doctor because “he who had ceased to participate in the good needed someone to bring him back to it.”²⁷

At this point, Gregory reaches the climax of his theological exploration of human history. Humanity was created good, closed its eyes to good and required a restoration to the good at the hands of the immutably good creator. How does God effect such a restoration? He must play by the rules, Gregory argues – rules grounded in, among other attributes, his perfect goodness:

It is universally agreed that we should believe the Divine to be not only powerful, but also just and good and wise and everything else that suggests excellence. It follows, therefore, in the plan of God that we are considering, that there should not be a tendency for one of his attributes to be present in what happened while another was absent. ... What is good is not truly such unless it is associated with justice, wisdom and power. For what is unjust and stupid and impotent is not good.²⁸

Goodness, therefore, must include justice, wisdom and power, and the atonement must evince these attributes to be fundamentally good and worthy of God. Gregory later specifies that the atonement must include “the union of justice with wisdom” because without wisdom, “justice is not goodness.”²⁹ Goodness, then, is the core attribute against which the others are measured – any one taken in isolation cannot result in a plan that

²⁶ *Religious Instruction* 9, 287.

²⁷ *Religious Instruction* 15, 291.

²⁸ *Religious Instruction* 20, 296.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 297.

measures up to the perfectly good God of the creation and incarnation; goodness results only when all are present.

Gregory in fact takes great pains to ensure his readers understand at each step of the atonement process how it fulfills the requirements of God's goodness:

All God's attributes are at once displayed in this – his goodness, his wisdom and his justice. That he decided to save us is proof of his goodness. That he struck a bargain to redeem the captive indicates his justice. And it is evidence of his transcendent wisdom that he contrived to make accessible to the enemy what was otherwise inaccessible.³⁰

To this point, Gregory has used God's goodness as the string binding the creation, incarnation and atonement. Yet he recognizes that his "fishhook" theory leaves God open to a charge of deceit, which would appear to undermine the very attribute at the core of Gregory's theology. The Nyssen therefore devotes Chapter 26 of the *Catechetical Oration* entirely to the question of God's deception.

The justice in God's action is readily apparent, Gregory writes. When the great deceiver is himself deceived, he receives no more than he deserves, and justice is paid. But this justice is not necessarily good because it serves no higher purpose than basic retribution. Wisdom then must step in, so as "not to exclude a higher aim." God, who has provided healing for the sickness of humanity, must now do the same for Satan; just as a physician disguises healing medicine in something more palatable, so did God "save the one who had been ruined."³¹

At first blush, Gregory appears to be discussing humanity with those words, but the physician does not disguise a drug for another's benefit – only the patient to be

³⁰ *Religious Instruction* 23-24, 300-01.

³¹ *Religious Instruction* 26, 303.

healed. The wisdom of the incarnation in the salvation of humanity is readily apparent; the question in this chapter is why God uses deceit to do it. The answer, Gregory argues, is that “the purpose of the action changes it to something good.” The physician did not only heal ruined humanity, “but also the one who had brought us to ruin.”³² Without the salvation of Satan, God’s plan can claim only justice without wisdom – and not only can the plan not be perfectly good, neither can its author. The very essence and character of God depends on the salvation of God’s greatest enemy.

Missed Connections

Scholars seeking reasons to downplay or dismiss the notion of Gregory’s universalism generally, and the notion of Satan’s salvation particularly, can certainly find them in Gregory’s work,³³ as the Nyssen often seems to pull back from truly definitive statements now preferred in contemporary discourse.³⁴ For example: “Not even the adversary himself can question that what occurred was just and salutary,” he writes, “if, that is, he comes to recognize the benefit.” This leads some to draw overly broad conclusions about Gregory’s eschatology, casting him as a conditionalist or a hopeful, rather than dogmatic, universalist.³⁵ Such arguments fail to address the concluding sentence in Gregory’s treatment of Satan’s salvation: “When, over long periods of time ... those now lying in sin have been restored to their original state, all creation will join in

³² Ibid.

³³ Baghos, “Reconsidering *Apokatastasis*,” and Giulio Maspero, “Apocatastasis,” *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, 57-64, are good, though ultimately unpersuasive, examples.

³⁴ This tendency applies to nearly every subject about which Gregory writes, as detailed in Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 1-4.

³⁵ Cf. Baghos, “Reconsidering *Apokatastasis*,” whose lengthy argument ultimately rests on the tenuous claim that scholars have, intentionally or not, mistranslated pieces of Gregory to obscure references to the eternal permanence of the fiery judgment – even though Gregory himself insists on connecting fire with purification, rather than condemnation.

united thanksgiving.”³⁶ Likewise, Gregory is quite clear in his belief that although purification can come from either water or flame, the purification will indeed come for all: “Since, then, both fire and water have a capacity to cleanse, those who have washed off the stain of sin in the sacramental water do not need other means of purification. But those who have not been initiated into this purification must of necessity be cleansed by fire.”³⁷

Nevertheless, even those scholars who accept Gregory’s eschatological beliefs at face value downplay their importance for his larger theological system, even as they recognize the cruciality of God’s goodness. “One of Gregory’s distinctive emphases in theology was to identify goodness as one of the essential perfections of God,” John McGuckin writes, but he makes no connection between that identification and Gregory’s eschatology.³⁸ Likewise, Morwenna Ludlow, one of the most ardent defenders of Nyssen universalism, calls God’s goodness “a cornerstone of Gregory’s philosophy” and notes its importance for his broader understanding of 1 Cor. 15:28 as requiring the elimination of evil.³⁹ Yet she gives little notice to the salvation of Satan in her two works where one would most expect its treatment.⁴⁰ Finally, Steven Harmon says he finds an “apparent lack of explicit connections” between Gregory’s atonement theory and his universal

³⁶ *Religious Instruction* 26, 304.

³⁷ *Religious Instruction* 35, 317. Gregory spends much more time talking about human salvation in the eschaton, but it’s important when considering those anthropocentric passages to remember that the Cappadocians considered Satan and the demons to be no less a part of creation than humanity.

³⁸ John McGuckin, “Eschatological Horizons in the Cappadocian Fathers,” *Apocalyptic Thought in Early Christianity*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009), 208.

³⁹ Morwenna Ludlow, *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner* (Oxford: Oxford, 2000), 86.

⁴⁰ Ludlow, *Universal Salvation* and “Demons, Evil and Liminality.” It’s telling that *Gregory of Nyssa* – her dialogue with others’ interpretations of Gregory’s work – says nothing about the goodness of God in relation to Nyssa’s universalism.

eschatology; likewise, though Harmon discusses the salvation of Satan, he also fails to connect it to Gregory's overriding assumptions about the goodness of God.⁴¹

This failure by Gregory scholars is somewhat mystifying. After all, it stands to reason that if the goodness of God is indeed the "cornerstone of Gregory's philosophy" or one of his "distinctive emphases," then it should play a significant role in his view of judgment, restoration and eternity – and it does, as we have seen. Yet no one appears to have made that connection to date, and the result has been to downplay not only Gregory's radically expansive view of universal restoration, but also to obscure his seemingly limitless view of God's goodness.

Conclusion

A close reading of these two works, among Gregory's most influential,⁴² confirms the scholarly consensus on two points: (1) Gregory of Nyssa held as a core assumption that God is good, and that this goodness extends to every aspect of the divine, including his creation, and (2) Gregory believed in a universal restoration so expansive that it includes the demons and Satan himself.

Yet our reading also reveals a connection between these points that requires us to re-evaluate whether we have properly understood the cruciality of Satan's salvation for Gregory's theological system – and, conversely, whether we have properly understood the extent to which Gregory saw God as truly, ultimately, perfectly good.

⁴¹ Steven R. Harmon, "The Subjection of All Things in Christ: The Christological Universalism of Gregory of Nyssa," *"All Shall Be Well": Explorations in Universal Salvation and Christian Theology from Origen to Moltmann*, ed. Gregory MacDonald (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2011), 47-65.

⁴² *Catechetical Oration*, for example, is favorably compared to Origen's *On First Principles* in Hardy, 244-45.

Indeed, Gregory's notion of the greatness of God's goodness cannot be understated. It is a goodness so powerful not even Satan can eliminate it from within himself, so irresistible not even the demons will be able to stay away, so perfect it can purify even the fallen angels who have devoted their existence to subverting it. Goodness, according to Gregory, is the ultimate trait of God. It contains justice, wisdom and power, and is the ruler against which to measure the purported actions of God to determine whether they are in keeping with the divine nature.

Satan's salvation, therefore, is crucial. If the devil cannot be saved, then God's goodness – instilled in all of his created works – is not strong enough to withstand the evil Satan allowed to grow in his heart, and we should abandon hope for the rest of his creation. Likewise, if the devil cannot be saved, then the deceptive atonement serves no higher purpose than retributive justice and collapses because both it and the God who enacted it are less than perfectly good. In short, although he doesn't say so directly, Gregory makes clear in two ways that if Satan is not saved, no one is.

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